

# FORT DONELSON.

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Commander and Companions:—

The surrender of Fort Donelson on the 16th day of February, 1862, was the first substantial victory achieved by the Union Army in the War of the Rebellion.

The year 1861 had closed somewhat unfavorably to the Union cause. The first great battle of the war in Virginia had resulted in defeat to the Union arms. There had been an occasional success in West Virginia and Missouri, but every state south of the Ohio and the Potomac Rivers, save the western part of Virginia and the State of Kentucky, had formally given its adhesion to the "Confederate States of America." The states of Missouri, Kentucky and Virginia were the theatre of war, with a very large percentage of their population favorably inclined to the South. Halleck was in command of the Department of the Missouri, with headquarters at St. Louis; Grant, at Cairo, was in the command of the District of Cairo, which included the camps at Bird's Point, Mo., Fort Holt, Paducah and Smithland, Ky.; while Buell was in command of the Department of the Cumberland with headquarters at Louisville.

When actual hostilities were commenced by the Rebels on the 12th day of April, 1861, by firing upon Fort Sumter,

the South was somewhat prepared for war. Its people had, for four months prior thereto, anticipated it and were fully determined upon it. The North was practically unprepared for such an emergency. They had felt that the differences would somehow be peaceably adjusted.

At the beginning of the year 1862, the United States had an army of 640,000 volunteers, 20,000 regular soldiers, and about 20,000 men in its navy; a total of about 680,000 men, largely untried as yet in war, but out of whom were to come the victors of Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Atlanta, Five Forks and Appomattox.

The Rebel armies were ranged along the northern border of the Confederate States, from the Missouri River to the Atlantic Ocean, and also occupied portions of Kentucky and Missouri. Columbus, Ky., was well fortified; Albert Sidney Johnson was in command of the Western Department of the Confederate Army at Bowling Green. To protect his lines of communication two fortifications were erected; one, Fort Henry on the east, or right bank of the Tennessee River; the other, Fort Donelson, on the left or west bank of the Cumberland. They were a little more than twelve miles apart, near the Kentucky state line, but in the State of Tennessee. Before the days of railroads, and even as late as 1861, these rivers were important waterways to the commerce of the South. To prevent them from becoming an avenue for the transportation of Union soldiers into the heart of the Confederacy, as well as to save them to the South, these two forts, Donelson and Henry, were built.

The year 1862 opened somewhat more auspiciously for the Union arms. On the 19th day of January, in the Department of Kentucky, at Logan's Cross Roads, near Mill's Springs, five Union regiments were attacked by the Rebel force under command of Generals Zollicoffer and Chittenden but the



Rebels found a general in command of those five Union regiments, who knew how to encourage his men to stand against great odds; afterwards at Chickamauga the same valiant general proved himself worthy of the highest rank by firmly holding the veterans of his immediate command against the repeated assaults of an enemy overwhelming in numbers and flushed with success. So heroically did his brave men stem the tide of disaster that his comrades ever after loved to call George H. Thomas "The Rock of Chickamauga."

Nine days after the victory at Logan's Cross Roads, or Mill's Springs, Ky., the general in command of the District of Cairo, sent the following laconic and modest dispatch to the commander of the Department of the Missouri:

"Cairo, January 28th, 1862. With permission I will take Fort Henry on the Tennessee and establish and hold a large camp there. U. S. Grant, Brigadier General." "A."

Two days later he received the following answer to his dispatch:

"St. Louis, January 30th, 1862. Brigadier General U. S. Grant, Cairo, Illinois. Make your preparations to take and hold Fort Henry; I will send you written instructions by mail."

Evidently General Grant made his preparations promptly, for on the 6th day of February following, Fort Henry had surrendered to Flag Officer Foote, of the navy, and Grant's soldiers were in possession of it. But Grant knew by intuition then, as well as from experience thereafter, that the capture of a fort was only an item in the great tragedy of war; that it was not forts merely that must be captured, but armies; hence he at once took measures to attack the Rebel army in and around Fort Donelson, and this was done without the approval or disapproval of Halleck ("B").

"A"—War of the Rebellion official records, vol. 7, p. 121.

"B"—Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, vol. 1, p. 296. Rebellion Records, vol. 7, p. 124.

Six days were spent in sending the gunboats and transports down the Tennessee and up the Cumberland Rivers. Some reconnoitering and skirmishing was done by the Union cavalry in the meantime in preparation for the attack by land, and on Tuesday, the 12th of February, 1862, the army under Grant at Fort Henry, commenced its march towards Fort Donelson, two brigades of McClelland's Division having marched three miles and bivouacked the evening before; Wallace's Brigade on the telegraph road, and Oglesby's on the more southerly road, to Fort Henry which led by the way of the Peytonia furnace.

The writer of this paper was, at the time, adjutant of the Second Illinois Cavalry, commanded by Colonel Silas Noble, only two companies of which, A and B, together with Company C of the Second and Company I of the Fourth Regular Cavalry, constituted his command during the battle. On the morning of the 12th Colonel Noble's command, pursuant to orders, broke camp about daylight and marched to the right (front) of Colonel Oglesby's Brigade. We passed the infantry about sunrise. Looking back over the long column in full view there was an army with banners marching to battle. This was no uncommon sight later in the war, but it was to me a most inspiring scene. The burnished arms glistened in the morning sunlight which seemed to make ruddy the faces, and rugged the forms, of the men in column. All were in the best of spirits. The air was balmy and betokened spring. Before noon of that day many an overcoat was thrown away as a useless burden, which two days later would have prevented suffering and preserved life. Soldiers were then, like generals, only learners in the science of war. Some two miles beyond the Peytonia furnace and shortly after noon our advance guard, consisting of Lieutenant Bennett with six men with whom I had obtained permission to ride, came

upon the Rebel pickets who as soon as they saw us fired one volley and incontinently fled. About a mile further on, after crossing a little stream which, as near as I can now remember, must have been the headwaters of Hickman's Creek, our vanguard—the Eighth Illinois Infantry and Companies A and B of the Second Illinois Cavalry—was attacked very vigorously for about fifteen minutes, until Dick Oglesby ordered forward Lieutenant Gumbart with one piece of artillery who sent two or three rounds of grape and canister into the enemy; thereupon they followed the example of their picket.

While we were waiting here, after this short skirmish, I went over the ground from which the attack had been made, and finding one poor fellow wounded I took a lively interest in him, as he was the first Rebel I had had an opportunity of conversing with upon the battle-field. He told me his name was W. W. Payne, and that he belonged to Forrest's "Alabama Rangers." He wanted water which I brought him from a pool near by, not having any in my canteen. The poor fellow at first did not seem disposed to talk, but directly told me that he was seriously wounded through the body. I sent word to our surgeon who ordered an ambulance to take him to our hospital. He died twenty-three hours afterwards. In this skirmish the Union troops lost one man killed and three wounded.

I allude to these incidents largely because they are facts within my personal knowledge; facts which stand out vividly in my memory, as I peer back through the mists of thirty-five years for my recollections of that battle. I understand these papers are for the express purpose of giving the individual experience of the writer; facts which may not be known to many, or which may not be considered important enough for general history. However, all facts are important; and the great historical artist who shall here-



after truly paint the picture of any battle-field of our Civil War must delineate not only the graceful form of the general commanding and the prancing horse on which he is mounted, but as well must picture the common soldier with his musket on his shoulder, his canteen, haversack, frying pan and cup at his back, his bayonet-sabbard at his side, and that longing look upon his face which tells that he thinks of home and mother. This paper, however, will not be filled exclusively with personal experiences.

Colonel Oglesby's Brigade met with no further resistance that day; but shortly after nightfall formed a line nearly parallel with and opposite to the left centre of the Rebel line and about one mile distant therefrom.

I well remember there was much confusion among the troops before getting into position that evening. One Union regiment fired into another killing one or two and wounding several others and for a few seconds the infantry came rushing back upon the cavalry, frightening our horses and threatening a general stampede. Quiet, however, was soon restored and the men bivouacked for the night. The troops had no tents, nothing with which to cover themselves except what they had providently carried on their persons during the very warm day; a day such as we sometimes have in the month of May in Minnesota. I suffered no discomfort that night, sleeping in the open air without a blanket; in fact I slept sitting with my back to a tree, the bridle rein of my horse thrown over my arm and, as I now recollect, had a very comfortable night's lodging.

The next morning broke bright and warm; Grant's Army around Fort Donelson was during the day disposed as follows: The First Division under command of General John A. McClernand occupied the right of our line, its right resting on Wynne's ferry road south of Dover. This division was composed of three brigades; the first commanded by Colonel



Richard J. Oglesby, consisting of the Eighth Illinois under Lieutenant-Colonel Rhodes, the Eighteenth Illinois, Colonel M. K. Lawler; the Twenty-ninth Illinois, Colonel J. S. Rearden; the Thirtieth Illinois, Colonel E. S. Dennis; the Thirty-first Illinois, Colonel John A. Logan; Schwartz's and Dresser's Batteries of Light Artillery; Colonel Noble's Companies A and B Second Illinois Cavalry and Company C of the Second and I of the Fourth United States Cavalry, with four independent companies of cavalry commanded by Captains Stewart, Carmichael, Dollins and O'Harnett; the Second Brigade commanded by Colonel William H. L. Wallace, consisting of the Eleventh Illinois, Lieutenant-Colonel T. E. G. Ransom; Twentieth Illinois, Colonel C. C. Marsh; Forty-fifth Illinois, Colonel John E. Smith; Forty-eighth Illinois, Colonel Isham N. Haynie; Fourth Regiment Illinois Cavalry, Colonel T. Lyle Dickey; and Taylor's and Mc Allister's Batteries; the Third Brigade commanded by Colonel William R. Morrison consisting of the Seventeenth Illinois, Major Frances M. Smith; the Forty-ninth Illinois, Lieutenant-Colonel Phineas Pease, making in this division eleven regiments of infantry, four batteries of artillery, one regiment of cavalry, besides Colonel Noble's four companies, and four other independent companies of cavalry, all Illinois troops.

The Second Division under command of Brigadier-General Charles F. Smith occupied the extreme left of our line, its left resting on Hickman's Creek. It was composed of four brigades, commanded respectively by Colonels John McArthur, John Cook, Jacob G. Lauman and Morgan L. Smith. The Ninth, Twelfth and Forty-first Illinois Regiments composed the First Brigade: the Seventh and Fiftieth Illinois, Fifty-second Indiana, Fourteenth Iowa and Thirteenth Missouri Infantry, and Batteries D, H and K First Missouri Light Artillery, the Second Brigade; the

Twenty-fifth Indiana, Second, Seventh and Fourteenth Iowa Infantry and Birge's Sharpshooters, the Third Brigade; the Eighth Missouri and Eleventh Indiana (zouaves), the Fourth Brigade, comprising a total of fourteen regiments of infantry, three batteries of artillery, and one battalion of sharpshooters.

The Third Division under command of Brigadier-General Lewis Wallace formed the centre of our line and consisted of two brigades, commanded respectively by Colonels Charles Cruft and John M. Thayer, comprising eleven regiments of infantry, one battery of light artillery, and one company of cavalry, the Thirty-first and Forty-fourth Indiana, Seventeenth and Twenty-fifth Kentucky, composed Colonel Cruft's Brigade, while the First Nebraska, Fifty-eighth, Sixty-eighth and Seventy-sixth Ohio made up Colonel Thayer's Brigade, to which was assigned during the battle on the 15th, as they arrived, the Forty-sixth, Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth Illinois Infantry.

On Tuesday morning early Colonel Noble's command was assigned a position in rear of the extreme right of General McClelland's Division.

John A. Hotaling, captain of Company A, afterwards General Logan's chief-of-staff at Atlanta, suggested to me that we two should make an individual reconnoissance of the enemy's position. He had been a sergeant in the Mexican war and was the captain of the company in which I enlisted; I therefore cheerfully assented.

Going about two hundred and fifty yards to the front we came to an elevation of ground, on which was a cleared spot of perhaps an eighth of an acre, surrounded on nearly all sides with young timber. We had crawled to this point on our hands and knees, and when we reached it were rewarded with a view of a Rebel flag, flying from the Dover court house, which was in a northeasterly direction from

us, and not more than three-quarters of a mile distant; while to our right, at an angle of thirty degrees with the line between us and the court house, we had a clear view of the Cumberland River. Captain Hotaling suggested this as a most excellent place for a battery.

Very cautiously we crept back to our lines and at once reported what we had seen to General McClernand. He invited us to ride with him to meet General Grant, to whom the information was communicated. General Grant was very attentive to what was said, but made little or no reply. General McClernand, shortly afterwards, sent for the two companies of the Second Illinois Cavalry and ordered them to occupy the cleared place we had described to him; scarcely had they reached the spot, when within short musket range, a Rebel regiment or what seemed a regiment arose and delivered a volley at us. Like other cavalrymen at that period of the war, we faced about and returned promptly without orders to our former position, strange to say, not a single man and only one horse having received a scratch. I was not present when the verbal report of this reconnoissance was made.

At this time the extreme right of our investing forces was the Eighteenth Illinois, commanded by Colonel M. K. Lawler, and the right of his regiment rested on the left of the Wynne's Ferry Road, as I remember, about three-quarters of a mile from the Cumberland River. There was another road nearer the river which led from Dover towards Clarksville, but at this time that road was covered by backwater from the Cumberland to the depth of two and one-half feet, and was impassable for ordinary travel.

During the forenoon of this day, Wednesday, the 13th, there was some fine artillery practice by Captain Dresser's and Captain Taylor's Batteries upon the Rebels; the pickets were continually exchanging shots, but nothing of note oc-



curred until about one o'clock in the afternoon, when an attack was made in front of the left of General McClermand's Division, by a brigade composed of the Seventeenth, Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth Illinois Volunteers, under the command of Colonels William R. Morrison and Isham N. Haynie. This attack was made near the Rebel center, our troops moving in a northeasterly direction to the attack.

After reaching a point near the Rebel rifle-pits, the troops maintained themselves there for nearly an hour, but were unable to make any break in the enemy's lines, and after losing a large number of officers and men, killed and wounded, they retired in good order, having accomplished nothing. I watched this attack and repulse from a point near the centre of McClermand's Division, and why that small portion of our army was sent forward to be slaughtered without proper support, I could never clearly understand. To a subaltern, unused to war, it seemed as needless a sacrifice of human life as did the charge by Colonel Boomer's Brigade against the fortifications at Vicksburg on the 22nd day of May, 1863. The official records do not state that this attack was ordered by General Grant. The General in his "Memoirs" says it was made without orders, or authority. ("a").

Toward evening of this day, the 13th, it commenced to rain and grew cold; the night was certainly one of the most inclement that I ever experienced out of doors. The next morning the snow, to a depth of about three inches, covered the frozen ground. I deemed myself most lucky that night in having a corn crib for shelter; but even with such luxurious quarters, I was inclined to grumble. Our whole army without the shelter of tents in such inclement weather, suffered greatly. No soldier in either army will ever forget that night.

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"a"—Personal Memoirs U. S. Grant, vol. 1, p. 390.



There was little activity along our lines on Friday morning, the 14th. About noon the gunboats made their attack on the Rebel water-batteries and Fort Donelson proper. It should here be stated that "Fort Donelson" was an earth-work near the Cumberland about two miles north of the village of Dover, which is the county seat of Stewart County, Tenn. It was constructed principally to command the river; there were two water-batteries erected below the fort and near the river, manned by guns which did the most effective work in preventing our gunboats from passing up to and beyond Dover. The Rebel lines attacked by our land forces on the 13th, 14th and 15th of February were protected by rifle-pits thrown up from a point on Hickman's Creek, about a mile and a half north of Dover, not far from Fort Donelson, thence extending southerly in three consecutive lines for a distance of over two miles to a point near the Cumberland River a mile south of Dover; the center of the Rebel rifle-pits being farthest from the river, nearly two miles therefrom. As I before stated the gunboats commenced their fight about noon. Their success at Fort Henry had made us all hopeful.

During this engagement every gun along our lines was silent; the pickets of both sides paid deference to the magnificent fight between our gunboats and the Rebel batteries. After a little more than an hour of continuous firing, suddenly the roar of artillery ceased. Men spoke to each other quietly, almost in whispers, wondering what the ominous silence meant. After a few minutes of such silence, a yell burst from the throats of thousands, ringing from one end of the Rebel line to the other, and the mystery was solved. Our gunboats which had been victorious at Fort Henry, had evidently been defeated at Fort Donelson. We learned subsequently that two of our gunboats had been completely disabled and the others, somewhat crippled, were obliged to withdraw from the contest.

It cannot be denied but that our land forces were somewhat discouraged. Our soldiers had hoped that the gunboats might pass the water-batteries and compel the surrender of the Fort, as they had that of Fort Henry. Our disappointment was great; the Rebels were exultant.

Night closed in, cold, cheerless and most uncomfortable, with great scarcity of provisions in our haversacks, as our commissary trains had not arrived.

Saturday morning, February 15th, at about a quarter before six o'clock, we heard heavy firing immediately in our front. The Rebels were evidently attempting to cut their way through our lines on the Wynne's Ferry Road and thus make a passage for their army towards Clarksville. Our pickets were driven in, and in less than twenty minutes the right of McClernand's command was actively engaged. It was one of those fierce onslaughts which the Rebels made so often during the war, gallant, desperate, but unavailing; it lasted from a quarter of six in the morning until nearly eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

The Ninth, Twelfth and Forty-first Regiments commanded by Colonel McArthur had been transferred to General McClernand's Division and assigned to the extreme right.

Soldiers never fought more gallantly than did ours during that long forenoon; but the Rebels were persistent and our men were obliged continually to fall back, although they did so deliberately and in good order.

At eleven o'clock in the forenoon the right of our line had been driven in toward its center, fully three-quarters of a mile. General McClernand sent to General Grant for reinforcements, but his messenger found on arriving at General Grant's headquarters that the commanding general had gone to consult Flag Officer Foote on the gunboats.

General McClernand, in his report, says that he appealed to General Lew Wallace, commanding the center, and to

General Charles F. Smith, commanding the right, for support. Both generals, as McClernand says, responded by saying that they had orders from the commanding general to hold their own positions at all hazards; they therefore declined to forward reinforcements. When the Rebels had driven McClernand's Division back from the ground he occupied in the morning, General Wallace, whose right was then threatened, sent Thayer's Brigade to his relief. The Rebel onslaught had been checked before General Grant arrived on the ground. If it was the purpose of the Rebels to cut their way out of Fort Donelson, they signally failed. Be that as it may, at eleven o'clock they retired within their entrenchments; their pickets, however, held the line they had taken from our troops during the forenoon.

About two o'clock in the afternoon we heard heavy firing on the extreme left, and within an hour came the glad tidings that General Charles F. Smith, at the head of the Second and Seventh Iowa, with his cap on his sword, led the men of those two regiments inside of the Rebel intrenchments. Our left had captured the rifle-pits of the enemy's right, and were in a position threatening their right flank. Our right, General McClernand's Division, had regained most of the ground lost in the morning. In this position both armies again slept on their arms, the Union army being under orders to make a general attack along the whole line the next morning.

At a very early hour on Sunday morning, the 16th of February, General John B. Floyd, commanding the forces at Fort Donelson, turned the command over to Gideon J. Pillow, second in command; who immediately transferred it to Simon B. Buckner, a man who had led the left of the Rebel attack against our troops on Saturday morning. General Buckner at once proposed to General Grant the appointment of commissioners to agree upon terms of capitu-



lation, suggesting an armistice until twelve o'clock noon. General Grant replied in a dispatch which made him famous, as follows:

"Sir: Yours of this date proposing armistice and appointment of commissioners to settle terms of capitulation is just received. No terms, except unconditional and immediate surrender, can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works."

General Buckner at once accepted what he called the "Ungenerous and unchivalrous" terms proposed by General Grant.

At sunrise, white flags floated from Fort Donelson and along the entire Rebel line. Within two hours thereafter "Old Glory" floated from the top of the court house at Dover. Fort Donelson was ours.

We took twelve thousand prisoners, forty pieces of artillery, several thousand stands of small arms and a large amount of public property. In the water-batteries there were one ten-inch Columbiad, eight thirty-two pounders, one six and a half-inch rifle gun, and two thirty-two pound carronades. These batteries had an elevation of thirty-two feet above the water in the river at the time of the attack by the gunboats, which gave them an excellent command of the river.

Floyd had escaped Sunday morning with a few Virginia regiments, on two steamboats which had been sent down from Nashville the evening before. Pillow went with him. Colonel Forrest, with his regiment of cavalry, escaped by fording the backwater covering the river road to Clarksville.

I have been unable to find, from the official records, the exact number of prisoners taken at Fort Donelson. The official report of General Grant states the number to be from twelve to fifteen thousand. I have always seriously doubted whether more than half the larger number were



ever actually moved north of the Ohio River; for on the Sunday after Fort Donelson had surrendered the utmost confusion prevailed among our entire troops; if several thousand Rebel prisoners did not escape during the next three days it was not owing to the discipline of our troops, but it was the fault of the prisoners themselves. A year and a half later, after the surrender of Vicksburg, the situation was quite different.

About ten o'clock on Sunday morning, I obtained permission to ride over the lines where the fight of Saturday morning had occurred. I rode at once to the point of attack, which was distinctly marked by the dead, both in blue and gray uniforms, who lay upon the field unburied. Knowing the position, I went to a log-house at the right of our lines, in which I found some twelve or fifteen bodies,—some dead, some with life not yet extinct. Calling to my aid an officer, whom I found to be the chaplain of the Forty-first Illinois, we carried out the dead bodies, straightened the wounded with their feet toward the fire-place, sent a colored man near by for water for which the wounded were asking, built a fire, sent for the surgeon of the Forty-first, and then I went out to view the field.

The sickening sight, in that log-cabin, of men who had lain for twenty-eight hours without food, aid or medical attendance, or attention of any kind, is one which will never fade from memory. Afterwards as I rode along between the two rows of dead, the gray on the right and the blue on the left,—as well marked as any two windrows of grain in a harvest field,—silently but fervently I prayed that war might never come near my home.

When I reached the point where the Eleventh Illinois had stood manfully for two hours, fighting against desperate odds but implicitly obeying orders to hold its posi-

tion at all hazards, I found among the unburied dead two, who only five years before had, as boys, attended a school taught by myself in Northern Illinois.

In riding along that entire line I met but one living person. I need not tell you, Companions, it was a solemn ride, and often as I rode along, these lines of Moore forced themselves upon my memory:

“Tho’ foul are the drops that oft distil  
 On the field of warfare, blood like this  
 For liberty shed, so holy is,  
 It would not stain the purest rill  
 That sparkles ’midst the bowers of bliss!  
 Oh! if there be on this earthly sphere  
 A boon, an offering Heaven holds dear,  
 ’Tis the last libation that Liberty draws  
 From the heart that breaks and bleeds in her cause!”

One further incident of the battle: Colonel Noble had appropriated for his headquarters the red brick school-house in Dover, one story in height, about forty feet long and twenty feet wide, with a large double door on one side, opposite to which was a large fireplace. A blazing fire had been built therein, our cook had just commenced the preparation of an evening meal of hard-tack, coffee and bacon when I saw three Rebel officers standing not far away looking dejected and forlorn. Suggesting their homeless appearance to Colonel Noble he said to me, “Adjutant, go to those gentlemen, give them my compliments and ask them to come and take such supper with us as we have.” In obeying this order I found one of the officers to be Colonel Simonton of the First Mississippi (that is my best recollection), another to be the Surgeon of the Third Mississippi, and the third the Lieutenant-Colonel of the Fifteenth Arkansas. The names of the Surgeon and Lieutenant-Colonel I have forgotten; in vain have I searched the

Rebellion records for them. They accepted the invitation of Colonel Noble and remained our guests, sharing with us our blankets on the floor and seats at our table until the Wednesday following, when Colonel Noble was ordered to Paducah, Ky., to relieve General Sherman from the command of that post. We parted with these Rebel officers with sincere regret, and I believe as personal friends. I distinctly remember that just before parting the Lieutenant-Colonel of the Fifteenth Arkansas, who had customarily been my partner in the game of euchre which occupied our leisure hours, gave me a most cordial invitation to come down to "Arkansaw" after the war was over and play euchre and hunt "bar" with him. I have never had the opportunity to accept his invitation, but I was, ever after that, satisfied that the men who fought the battles during the War of the Rebellion were not thereby disqualified from fraternizing as citizens of a common country.







